

GET THE FACTS

ABOUT ORGANICS IN ALBERTA



LET'S TALK ABOUT ANTIBIOTICS IN MEAT & DAIRY

If you've ever had a sickness resulting from a bacterial infection (like strep throat), you've probably been prescribed antibiotics by your doctor. Bacterial infections can be particularly dangerous to both humans and animals. Antibiotics are often necessary for treating these infections.

With the increase in antibiotic resistant bacteria, many people are becoming concerned about the potential for antibiotic residue in fish, meat, milk, and eggs even though Health Canada has established the maximum residue limits (MRLs) of antibiotics in food animals, which refer to the residue levels that do not pose a risk to human health if ingested daily over a lifetime. Although some experts and advocacy groups suggest there is little to no risk, others have the opinion that antibiotic resistance in humans could be linked to the ingestion of antibiotics in their food.

WHEN ARE ANTIBIOTICS USED?

Antibiotics are used to treat or prevent sickness in animals, and in some cases, antibiotics are only administered when an animal gets sick. Conventional dairy farmers in Canada may give their dairy cows antibiotics when they're sick, but the milk from these cows cannot be sold until antibiotic levels are below the MRL as set by Health Canada.

Organic dairy farmers are also permitted to give their dairy cows antibiotics when it's medically necessary and natural treatments don't work. However, the waiting period between when they receive antibiotics and when they start producing milk for sale again requires a withdrawal period of at least 30 days after the last day of treatment, or a withholding period that is twice the label requirement, whichever is longer according to Canadian Organic Regulations. If an organic dairy cow requires antibiotics more than twice in one year, the cow is considered non-organic. They may regain their organic status after a year without antibiotics, but many go on to be sold in the conventional market.

According to Alberta Milk:

"If a dairy cow is being given antibiotics for an illness, she is temporarily removed from the milk producing herd and her milk is discarded. Once she has recovered and the antibiotics have cleared her system, her milk is again suitable for human consumption. All milk is rigorously tested for antibiotic residues prior to it being accepted at the milk processing plant. If milk contains traces of antibiotics, the milk is dumped and the producer is penalized."

Both conventional and organic dairy do not contain antibiotics. Canadian dairy farmers and veterinarians must follow strict guidelines when treating a sick cow with antibiotics.



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WHY DON'T ORGANIC FARMERS USE ANTIBIOTICS?

With the exception outlined above for organic dairy farmers, the Canadian Organic Standards prohibits the use of antibiotics in certified organic animals. Organic farmers are encouraged to keep their animals healthy in other ways. This includes preventative measures such as supplements, as well as providing a healthy environment for organic animals, from feed and pasture to transportation and slaughter.

Organic farmers also select their livestock carefully. Some breeds of animals are better suited for confined livestock environments. Since the organic standards require that animals spend part of their lives outdoors (instead of within controlled indoor environment systems), stronger breeds of animals are often selected for organic production.

WHAT IF AN ANIMAL NEEDS ANTIBIOTICS TO SURVIVE A SICKNESS?

All farm animals are relatively healthy and have few run-ins with illness, injury, and disease. However, it is possible for a healthy and well cared for animal to contract something harmful.

When the life of an organically raised animal is truly at risk, organic farmers sometimes need to make the decision to save the animal's life with antibiotic treatment. In this case, the animal is permanently removed from the organic program

(except in the case of dairy, as mentioned in the "When Are Antibiotics Used?" section).

WHAT DOES THE "RAISED WITHOUT USE OF ANTIBIOTICS" LABEL MEAN?

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency allows products to be labeled "Raised without the use of antibiotics" as long as those products adhere to specific guidelines. Meat, poultry, and fish must not have ever been treated with antibiotics. This includes embryos and lactating mothers of the animals in question.

SHOULD YOU BE WORRIED ABOUT ANTIBIOTICS IN YOUR FOOD?

The long term effects on human health of trace amounts of antibiotics in food have been difficult to determine. In the regulation of veterinary drugs, including antibiotics, Health Canada applies scientific approaches including the establishment of the MRLs of drugs to ensure the safety of the food produced in Canadian farming systems.

If you are concerned about the presence of antibiotics in your food, you can look for the "Raised without the use of antibiotics" label or the Canadian Organic Logo. Organic meat, fish, and dairy can be found in many of your local shops and retailers.

WAYS TO LEARN MORE

Do you want to learn more about what organically-grown means in Alberta? Would you value monthly updates on Alberta's local organic sector – including legislation, farming practices, GMO regulation, and more? Visit organicalberta.org/getthefacts and:

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